Professional Activists? Party Activism among Political Staffers in Parliamentary Democracies

Pieter Moens (Ghent University)
pmoens.moens@ugent.be

Although professionalization and cartelization assume that political staffers have become alienated from parties, research indicates that many of them are close to their party. Based on unique survey data collected among the staff of fourteen Belgian and Dutch parties (N=1009), this paper offers an in-depth analysis of party activism among this under-researched population. Introducing a new rational choice framework, I argue that staff recruitment is shaped by forces of supply (candidate preferences) and demand (party preferences). Findings show that the majority of political staffers are high-intensity activists with a strong commitment to their party. Moreover, the theoretical model accurately predicts that non-activists are more common among policy – and communication experts, ministerial staff and those working for ideologically moderate parties. These observations challenge existing assumptions about professionalization and raise normative questions on internal congruence within parties in coalition governments.

Keywords: Political staff, Party Activism, Political Professionalization, Survey research

Introduction

Despite the central position of political staffers in contemporary parties, only a few top advisors are known to the public. However, infamous advisors such as Steve Bannon, Alastair Campbell or Martin Selmayr are just the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, a much larger unelected elite of staffers remains hidden. Amid a growing research interest for parliamentary staff (Pegan, 2017; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018) and ministerial advisors (Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018; Taflaga and Kerby, 2019), political staff remains "*one of the most under-researched fields in study of political parties*" (Webb and Keith, 2017: 40). A few notable exceptions aside (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017), party scholars have refrained from studying this notoriously elusive population (Webb and Kolodny, 2006; Webb and Keith, 2017). In fact, public administration scholars have noted that the party perspective is often missing from this discussion (Silva, 2017; Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014). This paper lifts the veil on this unelected but pivotal elite by analyzing original survey data (N=1009) collected among fourteen Belgian and Dutch parties.

Focusing on staffers' party activism, this paper examines a central assumption behind influential theories on professionalization and cartelization (Katz and Mair, 1995; Panebianco, 1988).

According to both theories, increasing professionalization leads to alienation between political staffers and parties. In contrast to highly committed party bureaucrats of the past, contemporary political professionals are assumed to emphasize "*the cash nexus of an employment contract instead of partisan loyalty or ideology*" (Katz and Mair, 2009: 759). Conventional wisdom among party politics scholars claims that parties' central offices have become vehicles of '*professional campaigning*' and parties' public faces have '*depoliticized into policy-making bureaucracies*' (Krouwel, 2012: 244). However, empirical studies in European parliamentary democracies indicate that most staffers are party activists (Fisher and Webb, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017).

This in-depth study of staffers' party activism tackles this apparent contradiction between theory and empirical observations via two research questions. First, the general level of party activism among political staffers is investigated (RQ1). Second, I examine whether their party activism is similar across the population of political staffers. Are non-activist staffers more common among specific staff positions, party faces or parties (RQ2)? Based on a original rational choice framework, I argue that forces of supply (candidate preferences) and demand (party preferences) stimulate the recruitment of party activists. However, I argue that Panebianco's description of professionalization (1988) has affected specific subgroups of staffers. Non-activists are more likely to be recruited for staff positions requiring extra-political expertise, in ministerial offices and mainstream parties. The empirical analysis aligns with earlier studies and supports the proposed framework.

This contribution advances research on political staff on several fronts. First, it enhances conceptual clarity by introducing a clear definition of political staff and developing a fine-grained typology based on staffers' principal activities. Second, the theoretical section bridges the existing gap between theory and empirical work by proposing an original rational choice approach to explain why most staffers in parliamentary democracies are party activists. Moreover, I reinterpret Panebianco's seminal work (1988) to identify which types of positions are more likely to attract non-activists. Third, the empirical analysis is based on extensive data collection that overcame the practical hurdles of researching parties' inner workings. To my knowledge, it is the first time a survey project covers more than a thousand staffers spread across three party faces (central offices, party groups and ministerial offices) from fourteen parties in several countries. Fourth, the conclusion reflects on the democratic legitimacy of this unelected elite. On the one hand, recruiting party activists ensures that staffers share the political objectives of voters and members. On the other hand, this mechanism appears to be the weakest for those staffers who matter the most.

Conceptualizing political staff

Political staffers are an elusive, understudied population in party politics (Webb and Keith, 2017). In this section, I introduce a definition and a typology to conceptualize the population of interest. Political staffers are individuals with a remunerated, unelected position that have been politically recruited within a party's central office, parliamentary party group or ministerial office. This definition includes four necessary conditions for belonging to the population of interest studied in this paper (Table 1).

Table 1: Key characteristics of Political Staffers

Criterion	Exclusion
Remuneration	Volunteers
Unelected position	Elected officials
Political recruitment	Civil servants
Inside organization/institution	Independent consultants

First, political staffers **receive a salary** in return for their activities, which sets them apart from volunteers like party members. Although volunteers remain relevant to the political process, the focus of this paper are the individuals who are directly employed within party organizations, party groups or ministerial offices. The origin of their salary can either be the party payroll, the parliamentary party group or a ministerial office (Webb and Kolodny, 2006; Monroe, 2001). Second, political staffers hold **unelected** positions, which sets them apart from elected officials like party leaders, MP's or ministers. In contrast to elected elites, staffers are appointed by party organizations or elected officials after a non-public recruitment process. In general, they operate behind-the-scenes, remaining invisible to the public at large (Laube et al., 2020). Third, political staffers are **directly recruited by party organizations or elected elites**, which sets them apart from civil servants. Admittedly, the civil service can itself be subject to party patronage (Kopecký et al., 2012) and a considerable portion of staffers has professional experience or future ambitions as a civil servant (Karlsen and Saglie, 2017). However, such 'hidden professionals" within the civil service (Panebianco, 1988: 234) are excluded because this would make the population of interest very heterogeneous and practically impossible to identify. Fourth, staffers are **employed by party organizations, parliamentary party groups or ministerial offices**, which sets them apart from external campaign consultants (Farrell et al., 2001) and firms who offer parties PR – and digital services (Dommett et al., 2020). Although Panebianco's seminal work on professionalization did include such external actors, the author explicitly addressed internal staffers as well (Panebianco,

1988: 229-231). By including both party (group) staff and ministerial staff, this study is the first to bridge the conceptual divide between two separate research traditions: one focusing on ministerial policy advisors (Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018), another consisting of party politics scholars who have studied party staff (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017).

Staff typologies

Panebianco's seminal typology of party employees made a distinction between bureaucrats and professionals (1988). Compared to the supportive 'line role' of party bureaucrats, highly-educated professionals took on advice-oriented 'staff roles' (Panebianco, 1988: 229-231). While Panebianco certainly identified an important shift within political organizations, this binary distinction is too crude to fit the practice of contemporary party politics. Several authors have demonstrated that most political staffers are professionals to a certain degree (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Salisbury and Shepsle, 1981) and the concept of professionalism has been criticized for obscuring rather than clarifying (Lilleker and Negrine, 2002).

Karlsen and Saglie (2017) describe four types of staffers based their tasks: communication adviser, political adviser, organizational adviser and administrative position. The typology presented in this paper is an expansion of Karlsen and Saglie's (2017) work. Based on staffers' principal activities, it makes a fine-grained distinction between six categories: managers, policy experts, communication experts, political assistants, party organizers and administration & support (Table 2). Compared to Karlsen and Saglie (2017), the extensive core group of political advisers was split up for two purposes. First, the principal activities of staffers within these six categories are more homogeneous. The activities of managers in leadership roles are very different from the personal assistants of MP's. Second, this categorization aligns with Panebianco's focus on extra-political expertise (1988). For instance, the specialization of policy experts originates outside of politics. Their expertise can easily be applied in other organizations or industries. In contrast, managers, political assistants and party organizers specialize in areas unique to political organization or –representation.

Although staffers' contribution to politics is often designed to remain 'invisible' (Laube et al., 2020), their pivotal role is irrefutable if the full scope of their activities is considered. **Managers** ensure that the political machine runs smoothly. As central figureheads, they are responsible for translating a party's political-strategic goals into an effective political operation. In this role, they often coordinate with elected elites and monitor the activities of other staffers as people managers. **Policy experts** provide elected elites with tailored policy advice by drafting legislative documents and

writing briefings (Maley, 2000; Busby and Belkacem, 2013; Gouglas et al., 2015; Pittoors et al., 2017; Wolfs and De Winter, 2017). In ministerial offices, they often coordinate with policy experts from other coalition parties (Maley, 2011; Askim et al., 2018) and civil servants (Askim et al., 2017; Connaughton, 2015). **Communication experts** help elected elites to connect with voters effectively in a mediatized political environment. They run electoral campaigns and promote the (social) media presence of elected elites on a daily basis (Askim et al., 2017; Dommett et al., 2020; Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2020).

Table 2: Staffers' individual tasks

Managers	Director (central office, ministerial office), party group secretary, head of general policy (ministerial office), cabinet secretary (ministerial office)
Policy experts	Policy advice (party study service, party group or ministerial office)
Communication experts	Director of communications, communication cell staff, spokesperson (party leader, party group or minister), internal party communication staff, translator, public relations staff
Political assistants	Personal assistant (party leader, MP or minister), parliamentary liaison (ministerial office)
Party organizers	Coach of local sections/campaigns (central office), experts in local policy (central office), assistants to party subgroups (youth, women, elderly, ...)
Administration & support	Finance and accounting, human resources, IT, reception, administration, catering (central office or ministerial office), personal driver (party leader, minister)

Political assistants are the main sidekick for many individual politicians as they manage the practical, daily routines of holding an elected office. In this role, they act as gatekeepers to elected elites by managing their daily schedule (Busby and Belkacem, 2013) and organizing constituency services (Landgrave and Weller, 2020). **Party organizers** support the party on the ground as the available pool of volunteers to run the party on the ground becomes increasingly limited (Scarrow, 2014; Van Biezen et al., 2012). In this role, they support local office-holders, candidates and party members (Super, 2009). Lastly, staffers in the **administration & support** category are part of the collective support structure of a specific party, party group or ministerial office and contribute to bureaucratic routines or provide operational services to guests, personnel and elected elites.

Staffers and party activism

According to influential party models, staffers' party activism has been decreasing for decades (Panebianco, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1995; Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999). Professionalization is considered the principal driver behind this evolution, as traditional party bureaucrats are being

'displaced' by political professionals (Scammell, 1998). A key point of difference between bureaucrats and professionals is their relationship to political parties. As described in the seminal work by Michels (1915), "*the bureaucrat identifies himself completely with the organization, confounding his own interests with its interests*" (1915: 138). In contrast, political professionals are assumed to lack this profound party identification because they have less need for "*traditional identity incentives*" (Panebianco, 1988: 232). Instead of political activism, political professionals emphasize vocational values such as technical expertise, career development and professional autonomy.

However, two empirical studies have demonstrated that party activism among European staffers remains strong. In both a single-party study in the UK (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Fisher and Webb, 2003) and a system-wide study in Norway (Karlsen and Saglie, 2017) the vast majority of political staffers were party activists. Most likely, these observations will also apply to other established parliamentary democracies, including Belgium and the Netherlands. In the following paragraphs, I will develop a rational choice framework explaining staffers' party activism to close the existing gap between theory and empirical evidence.

Supply and demand

The recruitment of political staffers is shaped by forces of supply and demand. On the supply-side, the preferences of aspiring staffers determine which types of candidates are available. On the demand-side, the preferences of parties determine which candidate are selected. By considering the preferences of both staffers and parties, I will first argue why parties in parliamentary democracies mostly recruit party activists. Second, I will argue why this mechanism is moderated under specific circumstances, resulting in a lower prevalence of party activism among some types of staffers.

On the supply-side, the preferences of aspiring staffers can be approached as an individual cost-benefit calculus. Evidently, candidates will only apply for a position when they perceive its costs to be outweighed by certain benefits. Existing literature indicates that the costs of being a political staffers are related to career stability – and development. Firstly, electoral dynamics make politics into an insecure professional environment with high turnover rates (Salisbury and Shepsle, 1981; Dickinson and Tenpas, 2002). Secondly, returning to the non-political labor market is not without risk. Former political staffers might face discrimination due to political affiliation (Baert, 2018). Moreover, potential employers outside the political bubble tend to undervalue their professional skills (Svallfors, 2016). These professional hurdles can be overcome by considering the benefits of being a political staffer. What drives people to become a political staffer in the first place? Most importantly, staffers receive remuneration in exchange for their work. However, not all staffers

consider their salary to be competitive from a purely economic perspective. Research has demonstrated that a considerable portion of staffers is convinced they can find a more lucrative position outside of politics (Fisher and Webb, 2003). Hence, I argue that working in politics requires additional motivation: the intrinsic desire to contribute to a party's political objectives. Of course, such a cost-benefit calculus is the most favorable to passionate activists within the party network. As a result, the supply of candidates is dominated by party activists who fit this profile.

On the demand-side, party preferences determine which specific candidate is selected. From the perspective of parties, hiring staff is a process of delegation (Strom, 2003). As principals, parties instruct staffers (agents) to perform a set of tasks in exchange for remuneration. Once they are hired, staffers are granted professional discretion – a 'space of autonomy' in which they are allowed to make their own judgments and decisions (Wallander and Molander, 2014). As illustrated by the earlier discussion of staffers' involvement in day-to-day politics, this area of professional discretion often includes important aspects of political decision-making. To ensure that staffers will successfully serve their interests within this space of autonomy, parties select candidates that are both competent and loyal. Loyalty is important to avoid that staffers would deviate from their principal's interests, namely a party's strategic and ideological goals (Lupia, 2003). This preference for loyalty is key to understanding why parties recruit staffers among their activists.

Parties aim to minimize the risk that staffers might deviate from its primary goals in the future. For this reason, I argue that party activism is a central selection criterion during staffers' recruitment. Admittedly, the loyalty of staffers can also be achieved by other means, such as closely monitoring daily activities. In comparison to the alternatives however, recruiting among a party's support base is the most effective approach with several advantages. Party activism signals intrinsic loyalty and requires only limited information and energy from recruiters. In effect, parties use a staffers' party affiliation as an informational shortcut to discern which candidates are more likely to act in their interests later on.

H1: The majority of staffers in parliamentary democracies are party activists.

Recruiting outsiders

To run an effective and competitive political operation, parties must also maximize the competence of their staff. Competence is important because it guarantees that the tasks delegated to staffers will be carried out effectively. Although political loyalty is valuable to parties, they will nonetheless recruit outsiders because the supply of competent loyalists is limited. For most vacancies, the supply of candidates includes sufficient loyalists for a party to select a candidate who is both loyal

and competent. For other vacancies, the supply of candidates does not include party activists with the desired skills and expertise. When this occurs, parties are forced to make a trade-off between loyalty and competence. If a party prioritizes loyalty, the choice is motivated by patronage – resulting in the recruitment of an incompetent activist. If a party prioritizes competence, the choice is motivated by professionalism – resulting in the recruitment of a competent non-activist.

The aim of this section is to specify when parties are most likely to prioritize competence by hiring outside the party network. I expect parties to recruit non-activist professionals if the situation meets two conditions. First, the available staff positions have to be too numerous to be filled by competent loyalists. Second, the available staff positions have to offer increased benefits to lure in party outsiders who lack the strong commitment of party activists. The remainder of this section specifies the situations in which both of these conditions apply.

On the individual level, numerous typical professional positions require a certain degree of "*extra-political*" expertise (Panebianco, 1988: 221). Policy and communication experts make up more than half of all staffers (54%; see Appendix B). At the same time, these positions provide additional benefits to attract outside candidates: remuneration and influence. Take Panebianco's example of an economic expert at a party research office (1988: 129-130). First, the scarcity of formally-trained economists in the labor market exerts upward pressure on their remuneration. After all, this type of staff professional can easily fall back on an academic degree to develop a career outside of politics. Second, economic experts yield a degree of influence because their area of professional discretion includes devising detailed policies with potential societal impact.

H2: Party activism is less prevalent among staffers in positions requiring extra-political-expertise.

On the party face level, ministerial offices offer numerous staff positions. Ministerial aides alone account for 49% of all political staffer in this study – about as many staffers as central offices and party groups combined (51%; see Appendix B). At the same time, these centers of executive power provide additional benefits to attract outside candidates: prestige, influence and career opportunities. First, a prestigious position in a ministerial office is beneficial to a staffers' social status. Second, the power of elected ministers has a spill-over effect on their staff. As staffers are often motivated by a "*desire to affect politics and society at large*" (Selling and Svallfors, 2019; Svallfors, 2017), access to influential elected elites considerably increases the appeal of a particular position. Third, ministerial staffers' access to a network of key decision-makers and their experience in government facilitates access to positions within the private sector, lobby organizations and civil

service. These career opportunities compensate the costs related to career insecurity (Salisbury and Shepsle, 1981; Dickinson and Tenpas, 2002) which might otherwise hold back outside candidates.

H3: Party activism is less prevalent among staffers from ministerial offices.

On the party level, mainstream parties employ the most personnel: traditional party families (christian democrats, liberals, social democrats) account for a clear majority of staffers (71%; see Appendix B). At the same time, the office-oriented nature of such parties offers additional benefits for staffers' career opportunities. In their immediate vicinity, both an established party infrastructure and collateral organizations offer many potential positions. Moreover, the moderate ideological profile of mainstream parties reduces potential costs. Aspiring staffers are reluctant to join ideologically extreme parties to avoid later discrimination based on political affiliation (Baert, 2018). In contrast, such discrimination is unlikely to affect the former staff of parties with a moderate ideological profile.

H4: Party activism is less prevalent among staffers from parties with extensive governing experience.

H5: Party activism is less prevalent among staffers from ideologically moderate parties.

Data and method

The analysis will focus on political staffers from Belgium and the Netherlands. Including two countries improves the generalizability of the findings and increases variation in party-specific variables. For example, the analysis includes three social-democratic parties, each with their own specificities regarding staff size, government experience and ideological positions. Due to the institutional dominance of parties, Belgium and the Netherlands are most likely cases for strong party activism among staffers. As classic examples of consociational democracies (Lijphart, 1984), civil society and welfare state institutions were historically structured along party-related pillars. Party dominance is reflected in both electoral systems, which combine list proportional representation, multi-member districts and party leadership's influence on the composition of ballots (Gallagher, 2005). These factors stimulate parties to behave as collectives and discourage personalized behavior among elected elites (Carey and Shugart, 1995). In this sense, Belgium and the Netherlands are the exact opposite of the candidate-centered US context (Farrell, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2002), where elected elites individually reside over an enterprise-in-office (Monroe, 2001) due to the weak position of party organizations . Despite many similarities, the habitat of Belgian and Dutch staffers is not identical. The total staff size of Belgian parties greatly outnumbers

the staff of Dutch parties (Appendix A) due the higher levels of public funding (Van Biezen and Kopecký, 2014) and the existence of extensive ministerial offices (Walgrave, 2004; Brans et al., 2006).

Original survey data were collected among the paid staff of fourteen parties (Appendix A). Since the support of party leadership was indispensable for contacting the target population, face-to-face interviews with senior party management were set up to gain an official endorsement. Although parties are often reluctant to provide access to their personnel (Webb and Kolodny, 2006; Webb and Keith, 2017), this approach resulted in the participation of 14 out of 25 parties represented in the Belgian and Dutch parliaments. Apart from the radical right family (which refused to participate), these cases mirror the diversity of the party landscape in electoral size, organizational resources and ideological outlook. Before launching the online survey, a carefully-developed questionnaire was tested among party staffers during 33 face-to-face interviews.

Designed to be completed in under 15 minutes, the questionnaire contained general background questions on staffers' sociodemographic characteristics, day-to-day professional activities and previous professional experiences, but also gauged their political attitudes, future ambitions and their interactions with peers and elected elites. Between December 2018 and January 2020, the complete population of staffers from the participating parties received a digital invitation to answer this online questionnaire, followed up by two reminders. Out of a population of 2936 individuals, the survey obtained a response rate of 34% (N=1009). To calculate response rates and check the representativeness of our findings, participating parties provided population data. Based on the weighted cases approach (Parke, 2012), X^2-tests were run to test under – or overrepresentation among specific subgroups within the sample. Post-stratification weights were calculated based on five indicators with significant differences between sample and population (country, party system, party, party face and age).

The conceptualization of staffers' party activism in this paper connects earlier research on party staff (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017) to literature on party activism (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Building on existing in-depth studies on political staff, four indicators of party activism were considered: current party membership, membership prior to being hired, internal party positions and electoral candidacies (Fisher and Webb, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017). Based on these indicators, staffers were then grouped into three mutually exclusive categories according to the work of Whiteley and Seyd (2002) on high-intensity participation. Firstly, high-intensity activists actively dedicate a portion of their leisure time to the party. These staffers dedicate considerable 'time and effort' to the party (Webb et al., 2020), either by holding an internal party position (e.g. local section, youth wing, …) or joining 'the public face of the party' by standing for

elected office (e.g. municipal, regional, national or European elections) (Katz, 2001).Secondly, staffers who's relationship to the party is limited to formal party membership without active involvement as volunteers were categorized as low-intensity activists. Thirdly, staffers without any link to the party outside of their professional activities were categorized as non-activists.

Table 3: Response and representation by gender, age, party face and country

	Response rate (34%)	**Population** (N=2936)	**Sample** (N=1009)
Gender			
Female	34%	43%	43%
Male	34%	57%	57%
Age			
18 - 35	38%	37%	42%
36 - 50	33%	38%	37%
50 +	30%	24%	22%
Party faces			
Central office	45%	22%	29%
Party in Parliament	38%	30%	33%
Party in Government	27%	48%	38%
Country			
Belgium	33%	89%	85%
The Netherlands	47%	11%	15%

Staffers' party activism will be examined on three distinct analytical levels: individual tasks, party faces and parties as a whole. First, the individual level is based on the six staff types discussed earlier. Second, the distinction between party faces refers to the principal location of their activities: the party's central office, party group or a ministerial office. Third, the analysis will examine the link between staffers' activism and party-specific factors. Government experience is measured as the proportion of time spent in national or regional government since the party's founding (multiplied by 100 to facilitate interpretation). Ideological extremity was calculated as the square of a party's distance from the center on the general left-right scale of the 2019 CHES data (Bakker et al., 2019). Lastly, the analysis controls for gender and age, as political work is characterized by a 'gendered division of labor' (Snagovsky and Kerby, 2018) and older staffers have had more opportunities to get involved as party activists.

Results

To assess the general level of party activism among staffers (RQ1), I start with a descriptive analysis. According to the intensity of their activism, staffers were grouped into three mutually exclusive categories: non-activists, low-intensity activists or high-intensity activists (Figure 1). This approach is more informative than a separate presentation for all four indicator of party activism because it captures the combined strength of a staffers' commitment to the party. For example, a staffer with experience as both electoral candidate, internal party activist and longtime party member is more intensely connected to the party than a colleague who only bought a membership card. A visualization of the separate indicators for party activism (current member, member before being hired, internal position and electoral candidate) can be found in appendix B.

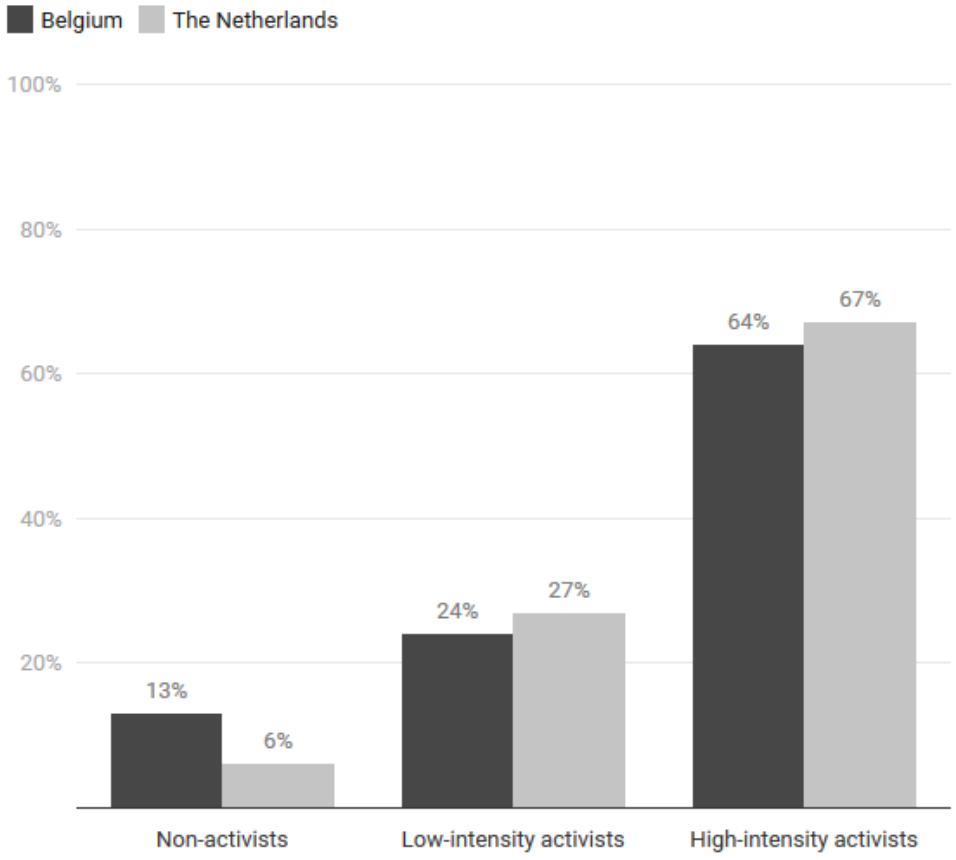

Figure 1: Party activism among staffers

The findings demonstrate that the majority of Belgian and Dutch staffers are committed party activists. The largest group of staffers are high-intensity activists who take up an active role within the party, either through an internal position (e.g. local section, youth wing, …) or standing for elected office on a party list. These staffers can be considered passionate activists who "*live for*

politics" (Weber, 1921). About a quarter of all staffers are low-intensity activists who's connection to the party remains limited to formal membership. Only a small minority of staffers are non-activists with an exclusively professional relationship to the party. These results firmly support the first hypothesis, which stated that the majority of political staffers in parliamentary democracies are party activists (H1).

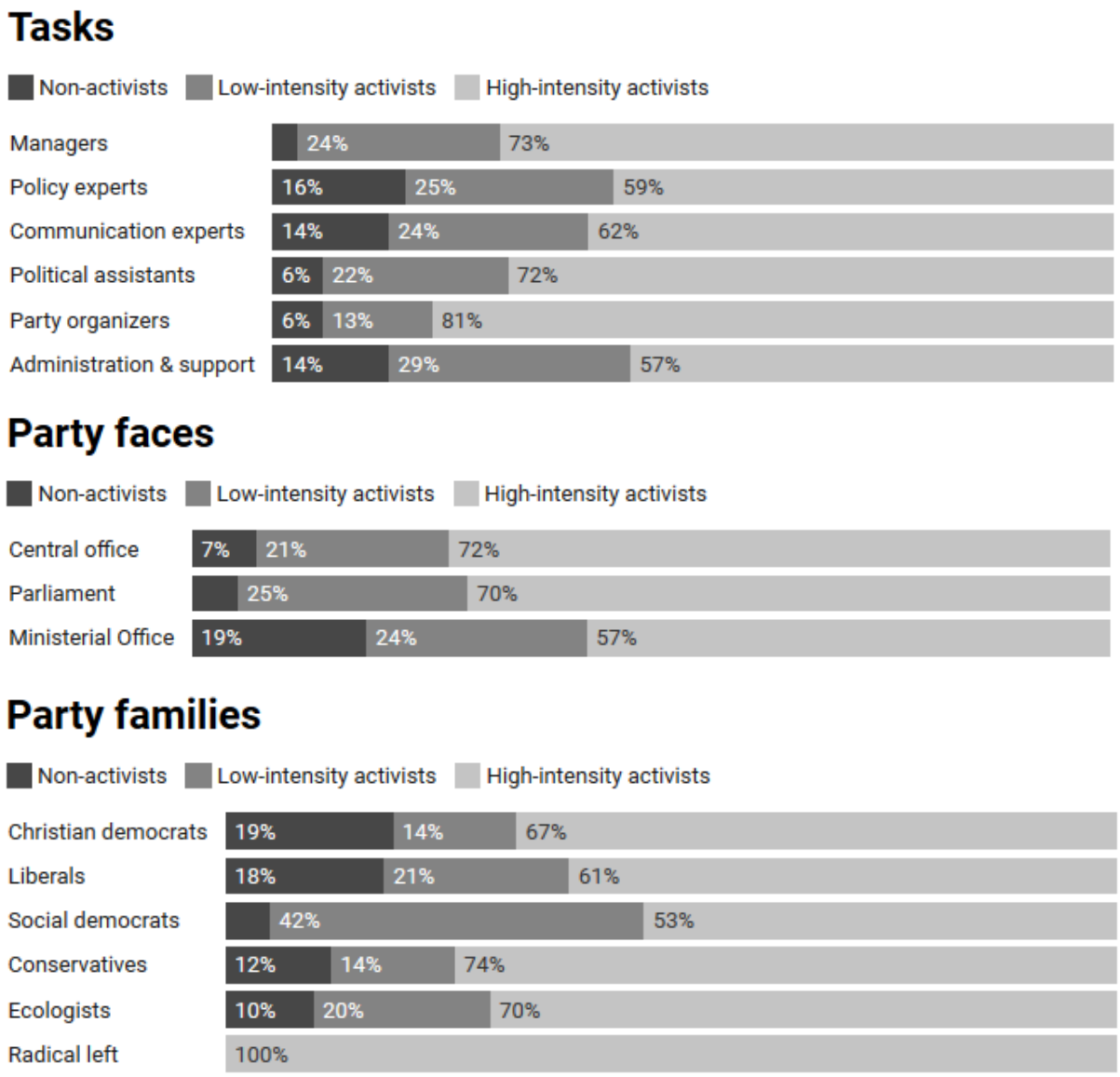

Figure 2: Staffers' party activism by tasks, party faces and party families

In addition to the general level of party activism, this paper aims to identify which types of staffers have lower degrees of party activism (RQ2). To this end, a multivariate analysis will examine whether non-activists, low-intensity activists and high-intensity activists are distributed evenly across the population of political staffers. Bivariate analyses demonstrate significant differences between individuals, party faces and parties (Figure 2, significance tests in appendix C). Non-

activists are overrepresented among policy experts, ministerial offices and christian democratic – and liberal staffers. In contrast, high-intensity activists are significantly more numerous among political assistants, party organizers, central office – and parliamentary staff and conservative – and radical left parties. The group of low-intensity activists is significantly larger among social democrats.

To correctly identify which types of staffers have lower levels party activism, three stepwise multiple logistic regression models were estimated. Each model examines which types of individuals are more likely to belong to a specific category of activists (non-activist, low-intensity activist or high-intensity activist). As all three models have identical independent variables, this set-up facilitates a comparison of the relationship between staffers' party activism and individual – , party face – and party-level variables. While a comparison of all three models is presented in table 5, detailed information on these stepwise regressions is can be found in appendix D.

On the individual level, the link between staffers' activism and their tasks is limited to a few significant results. Compared to managers, both policy – and communication experts are more than three times as likely to be non-activists ($p<.1$). However, there are no significant differences between staffers with different tasks when it comes to understanding low-intensity – or high-intensity activism. On the party face level, staffers who work in ministerial offices clearly stand out. Compared to their colleagues at central offices, ministerial staffers are more than three times as likely to be non-activists ($p<.01$). Vice versa, ministerial staffers are less likely to be involved with the party as low-intensity activists ($p<.05$). However, there is no significant difference between staffers within different party faces when it comes to high-intensity activism. On the party level, both a party's government experience and ideological extremity are significantly related to staffers' party activism. Government experience is strongly related to all categories of party activism ($p<.001$), but not in a linear way. While party activism is more widespread among office-oriented parties (fewer non-activists), it is also more shallow (more low-intensity activists, fewer high-intensity activists). Lastly, staffers from ideologically extreme parties are less likely to be non-activists. Surprisingly, ideologically extreme parties do not have significantly more high-intensity activists.

Table 5: Understanding party activism among political staffers (N=934)

	Non-activism	Low-intensity activism	High-intensity activism
Tasks *(ref.: Managers)*			
Policy experts	3,73 (0,67) °	0,91 (0,29)	0,76 (0,33)
Communication experts	3,50 (0,72) °	0,85 (0,34)	0,91 (0,39)
Political assistants	3,19 (0,77)	0,70 (0,34)	1,15 (0,38)
Party organizers	1,87 (0,97)	0,80 (0,44)	1,56 (0,57)
Administration & support	3,15 (0,72)	1,10 (0,33)	0,89 (0,39)
Party faces *(ref.: Central Office)*			
Parliament	0,59 (0,50)	0,86 (0,25)	0,99 (0,29)
Ministerial office	3,23 (0,41) **	0,61 (0,23) *	1,02 (0,27)
Parties			
Government experience	0,98 (0,01) ***	1,02 (0,004) ***	0,98 (0,004) ***
Ideological extremity	0,89 (0,04) **	1,00 (0,03)	0,96 (0,03)
Control variables			
Belgium	1,57 (0,51)	0,81 (0,27)	1,67 (0,29) °
Female	1,93 (0,23) **	1,33 (0,15) °	0,65 (0,18) *
Age *(ref.: 18-35)*			
36-50	0,56 (0,26) *	1,17 (0,18)	1,19 (0,21)
50+	0,72 (0,29)	0,98 (0,21)	1,01 (0,24)
Constant	0,07 (0,89) **	0,14 (0,47) ***	9,10 (0,53) ***
Nagelkerke's R^2	0,181	0,092	0,073

Odd's ratios & SE's of multiple logistic regressions; ° p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Although not the main focus of this paper, the results also highlight contrasts between genders and political systems. First, women are significantly overrepresented among non-activists. This means that, compared to men, female staffers are more often recruited outside of the party network. This finding adds to existing studies on staffers' career developments (Taflaga and Kerby, 2019) and the division of labor in political offices (Snagovsky and Kerby, 2018) by demonstrating that staffers' party activism is also gendered. Second, Belgian staffers are more involved high-intensity participation (internal position, electoral candidacy) than their Dutch counterparts.

By and large, the theoretical framework is supported by the analysis. The results confirm that party activism is less prevalent among staffers in positions that require extra-political skills (H2). Indeed, both policy experts and communication professionals introduce outside expertise into politics. This observation applies less to managers, political assistants or party organizers as they specialize in uniquely political activities. The findings also show that party activism is less prevalent among

ministerial staff (H3). Compared to central office staffers, those who work in ministerial offices are more than three times as likely to be non-activists. The analysis does not confirm the expectation that party activism is lower among staffers from office-oriented parties (H4). Instead, the findings demonstrate that the staff of such parties is concentrated within the middle category of low-intensity activists. Compared to parties with less government experience, office-oriented parties have fewer staffers without any ties to the party – but their actual involvement as volunteers is relatively weak. Lastly, staffers from ideologically extreme parties are indeed less likely to be non-activists (H5).

A key finding of the multivariate analysis is that staffers' party activism is closely related to contextual factors. While the seminal work of Panebianco (1988) emphasized individual differences between professionals and bureaucrats, this analysis demonstrates that individual factors interact with the larger context. It is no coincidence that non-activist 'professionals' are more common among policy – and communication experts, in ministerial offices and ideologically moderate parties. Of course, staffers' party activism is not dictated by the specific position they happen to work in. Instead, staffers' party identification (or lack thereof) determines their party activism and affects the types of jobs they apply – and get selected for.

The original theoretical framework of this paper works best to identify non-activists. Not only is the Nagelkerke R^2 value of the first model considerable larger than the others, the higher significance levels of the estimates indicate a stronger relationship with the dependent variable. This is not surprising, as both the existing literature and the theoretical framework developed in this paper focus on the conditions that lead to the presence of non-activists. However, the framework's emphasis on non-activists makes it is less informative for understanding the nuances between low-intensity – and high-intensity activism. As non-activists only make up a small minority of political staffers, future research could benefit from a more fine-grained theoretical understanding of staffers as party activists.

Conclusion

This paper brings important nuances to professionalization and cartelization (Panebianco, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1995). The findings add to the existing evidence that professionalization has not resulted in the dominance of non-activist political staffers in parliamentary democracies (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Karlsen and Saglie, 2017). Despite decades of professionalization, a majority of political staffers in Belgium and the Netherlands remain strongly involved as high-intensity party activists – which confirms earlier studies from the UK (Webb and Fisher, 2003; Fisher and Webb,

2003) and Norway (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). Admittedly, Panebianco (1988) described a longitudinal trend and only cross-sectional data are currently available. But even if a limited decrease in activism has indeed taken place since the *catchallization* of parties, several analyses demonstrate that the outcome is far more modest than it is often assumed. Moreover, the similarities between Belgian and Dutch staffers undercut the argument of the cartel party: Belgium's higher level of public funding for parties has not led to lower party activism among staffers. As pointed out by Karlsen (2010), influential party models overemphasize the American, candidate-centered campaigning dominated by independent consultants. In parliamentary democracies however, it appears that parties have established strong collective organizations with internal, party-affiliated staffers.

The high levels of party activism among staffers in parliamentary democracies can be explained by approaching their recruitment from a rational choice perspective. On the supply side, staff positions are more attractive to party activists than to outsiders because they strongly identify with the party. On the demand side, parties prefer party activists to guarantee that staffers share the same political objectives. However, supply and demand varies between different types of staff. Reinterpreting Panebianco's concept of extra-political expertise (1988), I anticipated that party activism is less prevalent among staffers with extra-political expertise (policy and communication experts), ministerial staff and staffers from office-oriented and ideologically moderate parties.

I set up an extensive original survey project among staffers from fourteen Belgian and Dutch parties (N=1009) to test these hypotheses. The analysis examined variation on three analytical levels. On the individual level, policy – and communication experts are less likely to be involved as party activists. On the party face level, non-activists are more common among those who work in ministerial offices. On the party level, party activism among staffers from office-oriented parties is widespread but shallow. A disproportionally large segment of their staff are low-intensity activists: formal party members without an active involvement as volunteers. The ideological profile of parties is also related to staffers' party activism: staff from parties with a more extreme ideological profile are more involved as party activists.

The mere existence of variation between staffers demonstrates that staffers' party activism has not decreased universally as Panebianco initially expected (1988). Instead, I argue that this evolution has occurred for a particular subset of political staffers: policy – and communication experts and those who work in ministerial offices and ideologically moderate parties. In addition to classic individual-level typologies, these findings underline the importance of contextual factors. In particular, parties' hiring policies are strongly related to government participation, as they balance the need for loyalty and competence among staffers during recruitment. The strong impact of

government institutions is illustrated by comparing Belgium and the Netherlands. As shown by the multivariate analysis, the somewhat lower levels of party activism among Belgian staffers are caused by the existence of extensive ministerial offices with higher numbers of non-activists.

From a normative perspective, it is beneficial to parties, voters and party democracy in general that most staffers are party activists who share the policy preferences of their party. As stipulated by the responsible party model, voters transfer decision-making power to elected elites by legitimizing a party's policy goals during elections (Mair, 2008; Thomassen, 1994). When elected elites delegate a portion of this democratic mandate to unelected staffers, their dedication to the party's policy goals keeps them aligned with the preferences of voters. This mechanism is especially important for staffers directly involved in democratic representation. Even among policy – and communication experts, however, only a small minority are non-activists.

However, the strong connection between staffers' party activism and government participation raises normative questions. Congruence between staffers and the party's political objectives matters the most when parties can implement policies by participating in government. At this point, it remains unclear whether this signals an ideological gap with their parties' support base. Future research could explore the mechanisms that hold this unelected elite politically accountable.

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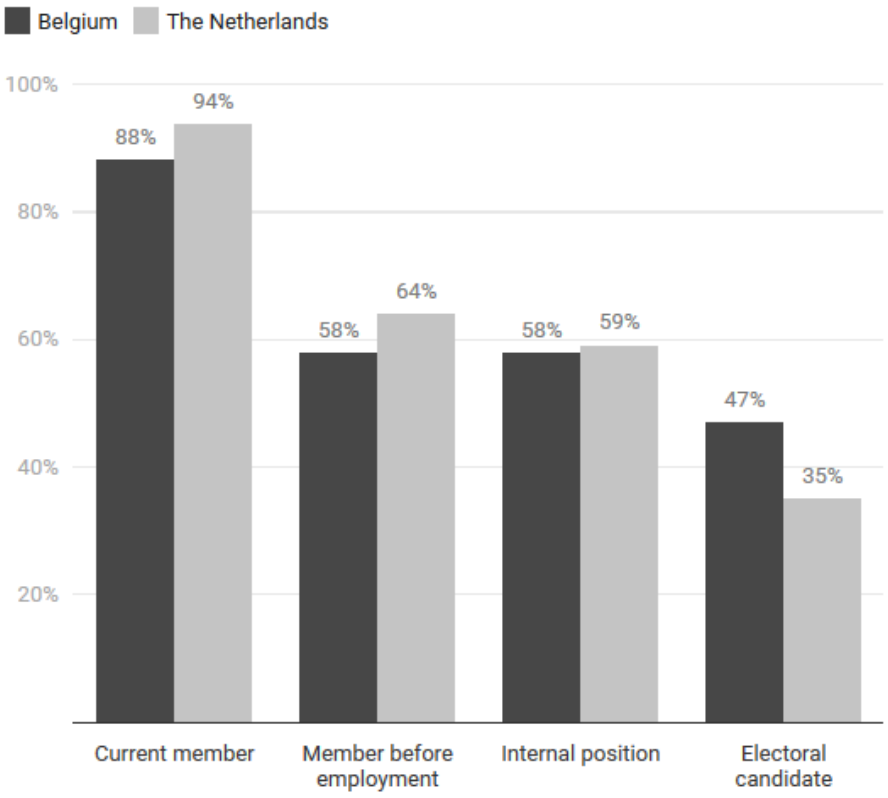
Appendix A. Participating parties (N=14)

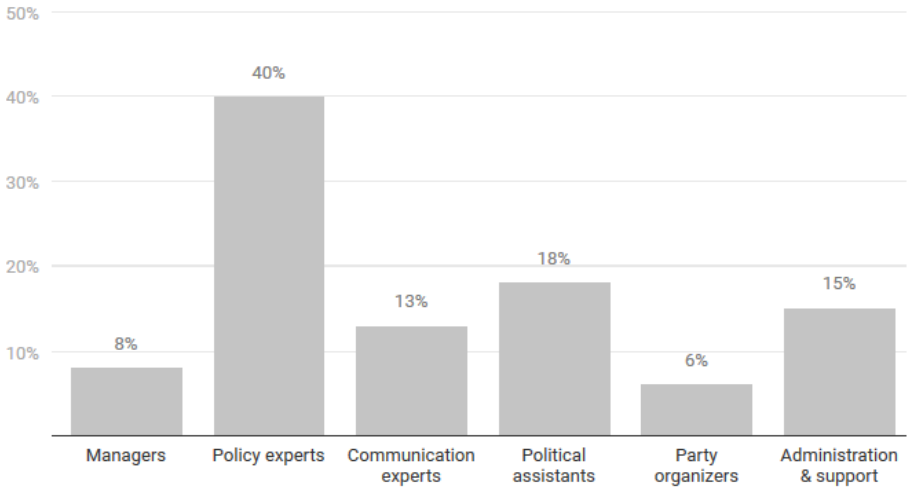
Party	Country	Party Family[#]	Vote Share	Total Staff	Response rate	Survey period	Government Experience[*]	Ideological Extremity[°]
N-VA	Belgium	Conservative	20%	560	32%	November 2018 - January 2019	39%	7,84
CD&V	Belgium	Christian-Democratic	12%	521	33%	December 2018 – March 2019	87%	0,16
PS	Belgium	Socialist	12%	565	29%	February 2019 - April 2019	88%	5,76
VLD	Belgium	Liberal	10%	417	37%	December 2018 - March 2019	69%	4
Sp.a	Belgium	Socialist	9%	192	34%	November 2018 – May 2019	71%	4
Groen	Belgium	Green	5%	91	45%	January 2019 - March 2019	17%	7,84
PVDA-PTB	Belgium	Radical Left	4%	65	38%	January 2019 - April 2019	0%	21,16
Ecolo	Belgium	Green	3%	104	46%	March 2019 – April 2019	31%	7,84
Défi	Belgium	Liberal	2%	103	19%	March 2019 – April 2019	16%	0,36
VVD	Netherlands	Liberal	21%	107	51%	October 2019 - December 2019	68%	8,35
D66	Netherlands	Liberal	12%	93	47%	September 2019 - November 2019	41%	0,31
PvdA	Netherlands	Socialist	6%	62	48%	September 2019 - January 2020	53%	1,78
50Plus	Netherlands	Liberal	3%	27	22%	October 2019 - November 2019	0%	0,06
SGP	Netherlands	Conservative	2%	29	48%	December 2019	0%	9,68

#: Parlgov Database *: Parlgov Database, % of time in regional & national government since founding °: CHES Database, square of distance from general L-R center

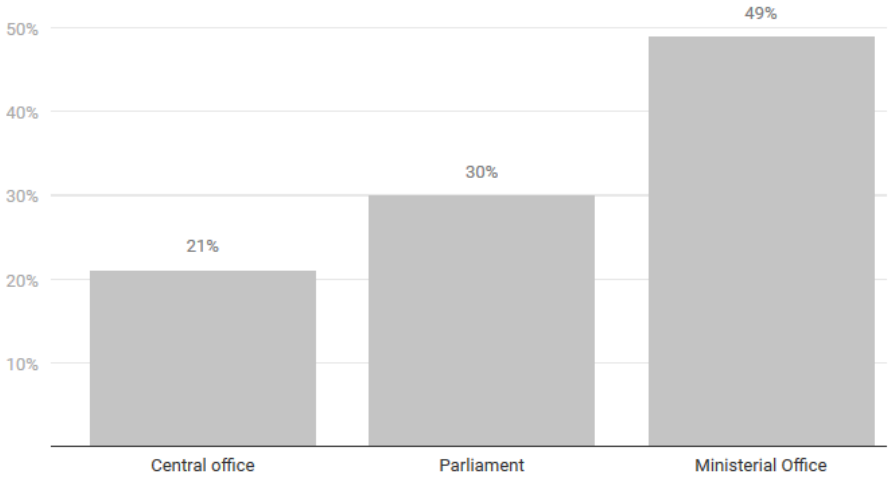
Appendix B: variable distributions



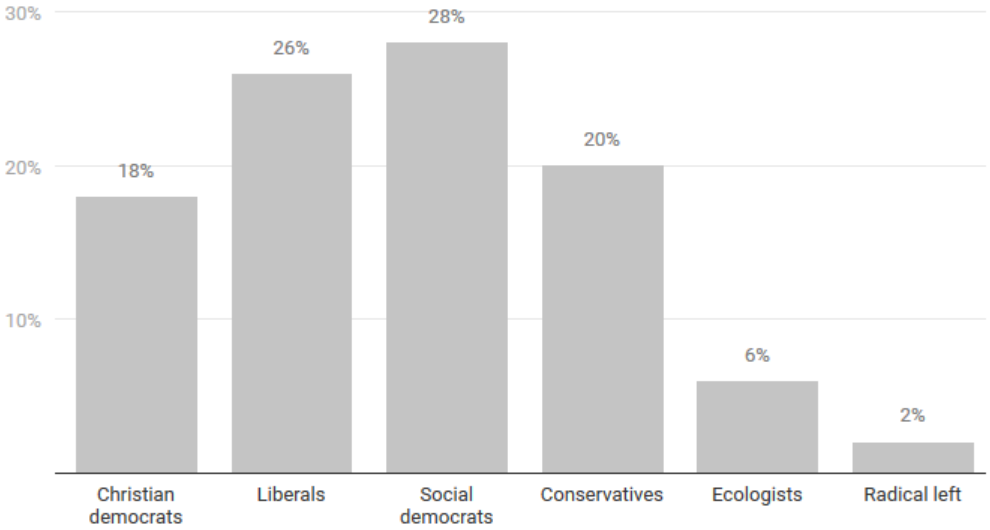
Tasks



Party faces



Party families



Appendix C. Bivariate Analyses

Table B.1.: Prevalence of party activism among political staffers

	Non-activists	Low-intensity activists	High-intensity activists
Tasks			
Managers	3% *	24%	73%
Policy experts	16% **	25%	60% *
Communication experts	14%	24%	63%
Political assistants	6% **	22%	72% *
Party organizers	6%	13% °	81% *
Administration & support	14%	29%	58%
Party face			
Central office	7% *	21%	72% *
Parliament	5% ***	25%	70% *
Ministerial office	19% ***	24%	57% ***
Party family			
Christian democrats	19% *	14% **	68%
Liberals	18% **	21%	62%
Social democrats	5% ***	42% ***	53% ***
Conservatives	12%	14% ***	75% **
Ecologists	10%	20%	71%
Radical left	0%	0% *	100% ***
Total	12%	24%	64%

X^2 tests (absolute value of adj. stand. residuals): ° > 1,645 ; * >1,96; ** >2,58; *** >3,29

Appendix D. Logistic regressions

Table C.1. Multicollinearity tests: VIF values

Variables	Current member	Prior member	Internal position	Electoral candidate
Tasks	1,194	1,024	1,029	1,027
Party Face	1,027	1,219	1,224	1,214
Government experience	1,147	1,461	1,533	1,533
Ideological extremity	1,446	1,461	1,513	1,516
Country	1,412	1,239	1,272	1,274
Gender	1,017	1,018	1,025	1,024
Age category	1,053	1,057	1,072	1,070

Note: Problematic multicollinearity: VIF >4 (Hair et al., 2010) to VIF >10 (Myers, 1990)

Table C.2.: Understanding non-activism among staffers (N=934)

	(I) Individual factors	(II) Individual factors & party faces	(III) Individual factors, party faces & parties
Tasks *(ref.: Management)*			
Policy expert	5,035 (0,665) *	4,308 (0,671) *	3,727 (0,674) °
Communication	4,000 (0,707) °	3,856 (0,715) °	3,501 (0,719) °
Political assistant	1,374 (0,741)	2,927 (0,769)	3,187 (0,770)
Organization	1,192 (0,897)	2,323 (0,962)	1,873 (0,966)
Administrative	3,320 (0,707)°	2,940 (0,714)	3,149 (0,717)
Party faces *(ref.: Central Office)*			
Parliament		0,627 (0,490)	0,594 (0,495)
Ministerial office		3,408 (0,395) **	3,229 (0,406) **
Parties			
Government experience			0,982 (0,005) ***
Ideological extremity			0,887 (0,036) **
Control variables			
Belgium	2,216 (0,442) °	0,901 (0,483)	1,568 (0,512)
Female	2,100 (0,218) **	2,003 (0,222) **	1,925 (0,227) **
Age *(ref.: 18-35)*			
36-50	0,619 (0,254) °	0,544 (0,260) *	0,556 (0,264) *
50+	0,838 (0,280)	0,718 (0,286)	0,727 (0,293)
Constant	0,016 (0,789) ***	0,020 (0,847) ***	0,070 (0,885) **
Nagelkerke's R^2	0,086	0,141	0,181

Odd's ratios & standard errors of stepwise multiple logistic regression; ° p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table C.4.: Understanding low-intensity activism among staffers (N=934)

	(I) Individual factors	(II) Individual factors & Party faces	(III) Individual factors, Party faces & Parties
Tasks *(ref.: Management)*			
Policy expert	0,906 (0,280)	0,946 (0,283)	0,908 (0,293)
Communication	0,886 (0,328)	0,883 (0,331)	0,851 (0,341)
Political assistant	0,840 (0,315)	0,796 (0,327)	0,696 (0,338)
Organization	0,898 (0,390)	0,777 (0,423)	0,797 (0,440)
Administrative	1,153 (0,319)	1,169 (0,323)	1,102 (0,333)
Party faces *(ref.: Central Office)*			
Parliament		0,926 (0,244)	0,858 (0,250)
Ministerial office		0,772 (0,221)	0,609 (0,231) *
Parties			
Government experience			1,023 (0,004) ***
Ideological extremity			0,999 (0,026)
Control variables			
Belgium	1,050 (0,241)	1,150 (0,254)	0,806 (0,272)
Female	1,302 (0,149) °	1,316 (0,149) °	1,330 (0,154) °
Age *(ref.: 18-35)*			
36-50	1,162 (0,173)	1,176 (0,173)	1,167 (0,180)
50+	1,046 (0,202)	1,071 (0,203)	0,979 (0,211)
Constant	0,345 (0,354) *	0,362 (0,388) *	0,140 (0,474) ***
Nagelkerke's R^2	0,010	0,013	0,092

Odd's ratios & standard errors of stepwise multiple logistic regression; ° p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .0

Table C.3.: Understanding high-intensity activism among staffers (N=934)

	(I) Individual factors	(II) Individual factors & Party faces	(III) Individual factors, Party faces & Parties
Tasks *(ref.: Management)*			
Policy expert	0,748 (0,323)	0,761 (0,324)	0,759 (0,330)
Communication	0,949 (0,377)	0,941 (0,380)	0,910 (0,387)
Political assistant	1,104 (0,361)	1,068 (0,375)	1,152 (0,380)
Organization	2,069 (0,526)	1,874 (0,563)	1,564 (0,571)
Administrative	0,862 (0,377)	0,865 (0,381)	0,887 (0,387)
Party faces *(ref.: Central Office)*			
Parliament		0,941 (0,281)	0,989 (0,286)
Ministerial office		0,846 (0,261)	1,024 (0,272)
Parties			
Government experience			0,981 (0,004) ***
Ideological extremity			0,963 (0,029)
Control variables			
Belgium	1,125 (0,254)	1,189 (0,412)	1,673 (0,290) °
Female	0,630 (0,173) *	0,634 (0,173) *	0,647 (0,176) *
Age *(ref.: 18-35)*			
36-50	1,164 (0,199)	1,175 (0,200)	1,189 (0,205)
50+	0,956 (0,225)	0,972 (0,226)	1,008 (0,235)
Constant	3,251 (0,390) *	3,396 (0,433) *	9,099 (0,532) ***
Nagelkerke's R^2	0,029	0,030	0,073

Odd's ratios & standard errors of stepwise multiple logistic regression; ° p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001